

Friday I speak about our attitude to trouble and difficulties. Christians are to trust in God and not be afraid. Yesterday our subject was the Christian attitude to those who cause us trouble. The Christian attitude can only be love, even to our enemies. But it is not enough just to describe these attitudes. The real question is how do we develop these attitudes in our own lives.

The answer is that it must come from inside us, from our hearts. Trust in God and love for others come only when the inner life of the spirit is strong, and our hearts are in tune with God. But how can we strengthen the life of the spirit? We do this just as we strengthen our bodies,--by exercise. But to strengthen the spirit we need spiritual exercise. Every Christian knows the two most important kinds of spiritual exercise. They are prayer and Bible reading, of course. But knowing about them is not the same as doing them properly. Today I want to speak about the second kind of spiritual exercise, the devotional use of the Bible.

People buy more Bibles than any other book in the world; it is the world's greatest best-seller. But strangely enough, many, many of the people who buy these Bibles will admit quite frankly that they don't quite know how to use their Bibles. I myself must have at least 30 Bibles lying around the house at home, and yet I confess that I feel most inadequate to speak to you about how to use the Bible to strengthen your spiritual lives. Why? Because none of us, I am afraid, even in a Bible school, really use the Bible as we should, and we know it.

We act toward the Bible something like we act toward electricity. Men have known about electricity for 2000 years, but up until very recently we haven't known how to use it. Men knew it had power, but they didn't know how to get hold of that power and make it useful. Even after scientists like Faraday and Edison discovered how to use it, most people still didn't understand it. I still don't understand it. It is a mystery to my unscientific mind how electricity can go into an electric lamp and come out light, but go into a radio and come out sound; or how it can go into a heater and come out hot, but into a refrigerator and come out cold!

The Bible is just as much a mystery as electricity to too many of us. We all know about it. We know it has a power. It has changed the history of the world. Some men have discovered how to use this power, and it has completely changed their lives. We think of them as saints,--but every Christian should be a saint, and every Christian should have this power in his or her life. For this is the only power that drives out fear, the only power that enables us to love our enemies. It is the power of the inner life of the spirit, and it is nourished and strengthened by feeding on the Word of God. In the Bible God speaks to us, and opens our eyes to the horses and chariots of fire, and we cannot be afraid for God is with us. And in the Bible God opens our hearts in love to all men everywhere, and we cannot hate, for God is love. The Bible makes clear and definite our relation to God and to our fellow men.

But the Word of God does this for us only when we use it properly. The first thing I want to stress about using the Bible to strengthen our spiritual life is that it is hard work. You don't get power without work in the spiritual life any more than in ordinary life. [If, when you think of devotional Bible reading, you have a mental picture of a pale young girl seated at a window with a Bible open on her knees and a pious, dreamy look in her eyes as she gazes out at the beauty of God's nature--then you are all wrong about devotional Bible study.] It is hard work. You may not be able to work so hard at it as the great saints have done--like Chrysostom who read through the Epistle to the Romans every day of his adult life, or like St. Francis who would stay up all night to read and to pray--you may not be able to do that, but you will have to work at it, if you want Christian power.

I would like to suggest, with much humility for my own shortcomings, four rules for this work of devotional Bible reading. The first is discipline. The second is attention. The third is meditation. And the fourth is action.

The first is discipline. Set aside a regular time for Bible reading. What time of day you choose doesn't matter, but the regularity of the habit does. I know. I've tried irregularity, and it doesn't work. When Mrs. Moffett and I were married, we discovered to our sorrow that she likes to get up early and go to bed early, so she wanted devotions in the morning; but I liked to get up late and go to bed late, so I wanted devotions at night. The result was sometimes devotions at night and sometimes in the morning--no regularity and no effective devotional life. Reading the Bible as a spiritual exercise demands discipline. Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits, went so far in this matter of discipline as to demand not only a regular time for devotions, but even regular physical actions in devotion. He said, "You must stand for a certain time and think of God; then prostrate yourself for a time and think of your sins; then and only then are you ready to kneel and pray." I think that is too much, and develops a harsh power of iron discipline, not the warm and radiating power of true devotion. And yet Loyola is partly right: without discipline there is no power.

The second rule is attention. It is no use to say that you are going to read the Bible regularly in order to know God better, and then go on to waste those few precious minutes of devotion by sloppy reading habits. It is amazing how little we really get sometimes out of what we read, or even out of what we look at. Dr. Kuist, a Bible teacher whom Miss Logan knows very well, likes to tell this story to illustrate the importance of attention. A student went to Harvard to study science under the great naturalist Agassiz. He expected wonderful lectures. But the first day, the great man just took him, sat him down at a little table with a rusty tin pan, slapped a dirty, little fish down on the tin pan, and walked away, saying, "Look at that fish. Don't talk to anyone else about it. Just look at it. I'll ask you questions about it later." So the student looked at the little fish. An hour later he thought, I've seen everything there is to see about this fish, why doesn't the teacher come and ask me about it? For a whole week he was left alone with that fish, and at first he was disgusted. But then, having nothing else to do, he began to look at the fish again, and began to notice things he had completely missed before. So when the teacher finally came around he was completely wrapped up in his discoveries about the dirty little fish. Agassiz had taught him the most important lesson of all: how to pay attention, how to observe. If looking at a dirty little fish can be so important, how much more important it is for us to learn how to pay attention to the Word of God the Living God himself as we read our Bibles.

[The third rule is meditation. Don't just try to see how much you can read. Stop and think about what you have just read. It is so easy to let reading become a substitute for thinking. We get so we use other people's minds in the books they write, and never use our own. You may have read about how one of the wise, old Greek philosophers, Democritus, discovered one day that he was reading instead of thinking, and put out his eyes so that he would have to stop reading and begin thinking. If you don't know what a paragraph in your Bible means, it doesn't do you any good to read it. Stop and get the meaning. Perhaps you will have to outline it. Perhaps you will just have to think it through. But don't let it go by without getting its meaning.

The fourth rule is action. Bible reading is not an end in itself. It isn't really devotional unless it results in a life of devotion. If you find Bible reading difficult and uninteresting, begin to try to do what the Bible says, and that will change your attitude to the Bible in a hurry.

When I was a boy I heard of a country church in Korea which decided one year that every member must memorize the Sermon on the Mount. All the church members promised to do so, all except one man, a poor farmer. "I can't read and I can't remember," he said. "All I can do is farm." And yet, when it came time for all the members to report and recite their memory work, this poor farmer knew it best of all. "How did you do it?" they asked. "Well," he said, "I thought I ought to try at least. So I went home and had

my son read the first verse to me, and all the next day I thought about it, and said it over, and I tried to be "pure in heart". And when the day was over I couldn't forget it, and I was ready for the next verse." That was it was easy to learn it. The hard part was doing it.

[These are four simple rules for using the Bible to strengthen our spiritual lives, but I think they help, and are worth remembering. To help me remember them, I think of the four examples. For discipline, I remember Loyola, who said, "Discipline your body if you want to learn how to discipline your spirit." For attention I remember Agassiz, who kept saying, "Look, look, look." For meditation I remember Democritus, who put out his eyes so that he might learn how to think. And for action, I like to remember the Korean farmer who learned the sermon on the mount by doing it.]

But there is a far better example for all of us. Remember Loyola as an example of discipline, if you wish, but don't follow him. The one to follow is Jesus Christ, who although he could begin his ministry with the discipline of a 40-day fast, yet never allowed a schedule to keep him from anyone in need. And for attention, remember Agassiz if you will, but follow Jesus Christ, who already at the age of 12 knew his Bible so well that he could confound the experts at the temple with his questions. For meditation, remember Democritus, but follow Jesus, who knew that he must draw away from the crowds from time to time to renew his strength in communion with God. And for action, remember the Korean farmer, but follow the Lord Jesus, yea, though it leads to a cross.

Follow Jesus. Let that be your aim in all your Bible reading, as in all your life. For he is more than an example. He is the goal and object of our devotions, and we read the Bible only that the written word may lead us ever more clearly and intimately into the presence of Him who is the Living Word. So we end, as we began three days ago, in the practice of the presence of God.